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Methodological immaturity in childhood research? Thinking through 'participatory methods'.

Lesley-Anne Gallacher and Michael Gallagher

Abstract: Much of the recent literature on social research with children advocates the use of participatory techniques. This article attempts to rethink such techniques in several ways. The authors argue that participatory approaches, in their insistence that children should take part in research, may in fact involve children in processes that aim to regulate them. Using examples drawn from their own work, the authors question whether participatory methods are necessary for children to exercise agency in research encounters. They conclude by suggesting that researchers working with children might benefit from an attitude of methodological immaturity.

Keywords: becoming; childhood research; immaturity; methodology; participation.

This article arose out of a shared concern about the increasing dominance of 'participatory' approaches to research involving children, and the uncritical ways in which they are often deployed in such research. This concern has at times made us both feel somewhat 'out of place' as (ostensibly) 'children's geographers' working within the broader field of childhood studies. In this field, participatory research methods are almost universally lauded – and it is easy to see why. Against the backdrop of the objectification of children by traditional and psychological social research, participatory approaches appear emancipatory and democratic, respecting children's agency as individuals in their own right. Furthermore, participatory approaches seem to have an epistemological advantage over more traditional approaches; they promise to access the perspectives of the children being researched, rather than the perspectives of the adult researchers. On the surface at least, these features are very attractive. However, we want to argue that this attractiveness may obscure the problems of these approaches. In the interests of increasing our understanding of such approaches, we want to examine some of these problems. In so doing, we hope to build on critiques of participatory methods within development studies (such as Cooke and Kothari, 2001) and human geography (e.g. Kesby, 2000; Pain, 2004).

After considering what participatory methods are, and how they have come to be employed in childhood research, we can begin to question whether 'participatory methods' can deliver all that they promise. We do so by examining the ontological and epistemological assumptions on which they are premised. We use the notion of 'active participation' to unpick concepts of 'empowerment', 'intentionality' and 'agency' that are embedded in the broadly Cartesian subjectivity that underpins 'participatory methods'. Following from this, we start to think beyond 'participation', using some brief empirical examples from our own research to problematize the power relationships in research encounters. This allows us to set out what we believe to be a more useful model of emergent subjectivity, from which we can advocate a position of methodological immaturity in research, which admits to vulnerability and fallibility. In doing so, we are not offering any advice on *technique*. Rather we seek to offer a broad methodological reflection on the usefulness of 'participation' as a framework for research involving children.

What are 'participatory' methods, and why do we need them?

The current enthusiasm for participatory methods can be traced back to the early 1990s 'paradigm shift' in the social study of childhood (see Prout and James, 1990). While we do not want to dwell on a set of arguments that have been discussed and repeated across the literature in the intervening years (e.g. Holloway and Valentine, 2000; James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2002), some brief contextual remarks are necessary here. The movement that is usually referred to as the 'new social studies of childhood' was a reaction against some of the assumptions that had come to dominate child research, and which subordinated childhood to adulthood. Children were largely understood as incompetent and *developing* 'becoming-adults'. In comparison to adults, they were found wanting (Lee, 2001). In contrast, the so-called 'paradigm shift' sought to reposition children as competent social actors in their own right. As such, the movement has rallied round the claim that children should be studied as 'social actors, as beings in their own right rather than pre-adult becomings' (Holloway and Valentine, 2000: 5).

Consequently, current childhood research is broadly underpinned by two key imperatives: that children should be studied for and in themselves, not simply as a means of understanding the adult world, or of addressing its concerns; and that researchers should be attentive to the peculiarities and specificities of individual childhoods as geographically, historically and socially situated (Prout, 2005). In this way, it is not sufficient to carry out research *on* or *about* childhood; childhood researchers must research *for* and *with* children (e.g. Cairns, 2001; Christensen and Prout, 2002; Clark and Moss, 2001; Mayall, 2002; Punch, 2002). It is no longer enough to simply reposition children as the *subjects* – rather than *objects* – of research; children should be engaged as *participants* in the research process, if not as *researchers* in themselves (Cairns, 2001; Kellett et al., 2004).

Roger Hart (1997) describes children's participation as a metaphorical 'ladder' that climbs from no participation, through various stages of 'tokenism' and semi-participation, to an ideal state of 'full' participation. Applied to research, this metaphor might be said to produce a methodological hierarchy in which 'good' – or perhaps 'best' – practice will be situated on the top-most rung (full participation), above less 'participatory' projects (Sinclair, 2004). An unintended, and somewhat ironic, consequence of this is that discourses of 'participation' risk becoming tyrannous in research involving children (for a similar critique of the development studies literature, see also Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Of course, discourses of 'participation' are not unique to childhood research; they are caught up in wider societal debates surrounding rights and citizenship. In the childhood literature, this is often couched in terms of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (e.g. Alderson, 1995).

On the surface, at least, this is all very appealing, and we do not doubt the good intentions of those advocating 'participation'. However, it is important not to be distracted by the ethical allure of 'empowerment', 'agency' or 'self-determination'. With this in mind, we want to begin to unpick the foundations of 'participatory methods', to tease out some of the epistemological and ontological assumptions on which they rest.

The epistemology and ontology of participatory methods

In the literature, the ethical and political arguments about children's rights to participate in research are often allied to claims about the epistemological advantages of participatory methods. Caitlin Cahill (2004) has argued that participatory methods generate 'better' knowledge than other techniques, while Mike Kesby maintains that participatory methods can 'access and valorise previously neglected knowledges and provide more nuanced understandings of complex

social phenomena' (Kesby, 2000: 423). Participatory methods are thus seen as producing more 'authentic' knowledge about children's subjective realities (Grover, 2004).

Such arguments could be summarized in the oft-repeated claim that children are 'experts' in their own lives (e.g. Burke, 2005; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003). The premise here is that identity produces knowledge. According to this logic, people with a certain identity are best placed to produce knowledge about others with a similar identity: children are better placed to know about childhood than adults. For example, Alison Clark and Peter Moss (2001) claim that 3- and 4-year-olds might provide better insights into the experience of babies at nursery than adult researchers. Taken to its ultimate conclusion, this premise leads to the belief that each person is best placed to know him- or herself; after all, even children of the same age, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexuality and nationality may be very different from one another. An epistemology of this kind assumes that people are transparently knowable to themselves, and privileges their 'voices' as the most authentic source of knowledge about themselves and their lives.

This epistemology of self-knowledge implies a discrete and identifiable knowing subject – a Cartesian *cogito* (Foucault, 1989). Against the image of children as developing, changing and unstable, the new social studies attempts to rethink children as 'beings' rather than 'becomings' who should be taken seriously in the present tense, rather than engaged simply as future adults-in-the-making (e.g. Holloway and Valentine, 2000; James et al., 1998; Prout and James, 1990). In more straightforward terms, children are understood as autonomous individuals who are sovereign over themselves. According to this model, children's more or less stable and coherent identities give them access to self-knowledge. And as coherent, knowing, autonomous beings, children are imbued with agency. In this context, agency can be understood as the ability of an identifiable being to knowingly and deliberately use its willpower to achieve predetermined aims. We return in due course to this ontology of children as agentic Cartesian beings. For now, we want to explore the relationship between this conception of agency and the troublesome notion of empowerment through participation.

'Participation', 'agency' and 'empowerment'

While it is generally agreed that 'participation' is a positive attribute of research, in childhood studies there has been limited methodological reflection upon what the term actually means. It is often claimed that 'participatory' methods 'empower' children to create knowledge and/or change the circumstances in which they live (e.g. Cahill, 2004). This is in contrast to a less favourable, more traditional, model in which adults create knowledge about children, thereby 'disempowering' them, and preventing them from engaging actively as human agents. It seems to us that this claim is premised on several problematic assumptions.

Most strikingly, it assumes that children require to be 'empowered' by adults if they are to act in the world. Thomas and O'Kane (1998: 338) explain how they 'develop[ed] a range of participatory techniques designed specifically to allow children to participate on their own terms'. This implies that the children's involvement in their research was dependent upon these adult-devised techniques. This stands in direct contradiction to the wealth of work in childhood studies that has sought to draw attention to the ways in which children actively shape and organize the world around them – often independently of adults, and sometimes in spite of them (e.g. Jones, 2000; Smith and Barker, 2000). The children in our own research have been far from docile (Gallacher, 2002, 2005; Gallagher, 2001, 2005, 2006). As such, we cannot help but consider the impetus towards 'empowerment' in 'participatory' childhood research somewhat ironic. The very notion of 'empowerment' implies that, without aid and encouragement from

adult-designed 'participatory methods', children cannot fully exercise their 'agency' in research encounters. In this way, advocates of 'participatory methods' risk perpetuating the very model that they purport to oppose.

Part of the problem here is the notion that power is a commodity to be acquired, exchanged, shared and relinquished at will. Michel Foucault's work questioned this economic model of power, suggesting that power may be more usefully conceived of as something exercised through small-scale, everyday forms of persuasion, actions that affect other actions (Foucault, 1989; see also Gallagher, 2008). Conceived of as such, power exists only in action. The problem is compounded by the idea that, as a commodity, power can be transmitted by a set of predetermined techniques. By contrast, the recognition that research participants can, and do, act places them beyond the control of the researcher and his or her techniques. This is to admit that research participants might act in all sorts of unexpected ways, and that no amount of meticulously preplanned and carefully applied technique will alter this. Indeed, to seek to do so would be contrary to the spirit in which 'participatory methods' are offered.

This brings us to yet another problem with the technical rationality of 'empowerment': the equation of participation in research with 'agency'. The assumption here is that the use of participatory techniques will enable children to exercise their 'agency' by taking part in the construction of knowledge about themselves. We have already discussed some of the problems with this notion of agency as an attribute possessed by intentional subjects. However, two issues merit further discussion. First, knowledge is not innocent of power. Once again Foucault's work on the close relationship between knowledge and power is instructive here (1977, 1978). In order to be effective, governmental power depends upon knowledge of the population being governed. We want to suggest that current enthusiasm for practical, 'policy-relevant' social research on children is closely connected to adult anxieties about young people: how to improve them, make them more employable, more productive and healthier; how to encourage and regulate their moral conduct and to participate in democratic politics. That is, it is concerned with the production of ideal future citizens (Rose, 1999).

If this is the case, then to encourage children to participate in creating knowledge about themselves is also to encourage them to take part in the processes used to regulate them. Of course, there need not be anything sinister or totalitarian about this. In most cases, it no doubt springs from a genuine concern for the well-being of a population and, accordingly, for the children whose fate will determine the future well-being of that population. Nonetheless, such governmental anxieties represent an adult perspective in which children are seen as either dangerous or in danger (Jenks, 1996). Either way, they are in need of regulation, guidance and assistance. In this sense, regardless of how much emphasis is placed on children's daily lives, this perspective still engages with children as adults-in-the-making. Again, this is antithetical to the stance taken by most advocates of participatory methods.

Second, most research involving children depends on children taking part in the construction of knowledge about themselves in some way. This might be filling in a questionnaire, speaking to an interviewer, contributing to a group discussion, helping to make a video, taking photographs or any number of other things. Advocates of participatory techniques might argue that the kinds of participation afforded by these techniques are in some way superior to the kinds of participation facilitated by, say, survey methods. To help make sense of this, we want to examine the curious distinction made by some authors between 'active' and 'passive' participation (Grover, 2004; Sinclair, 2004). 'Passive participation' is an intriguing, almost oxymoronic, concept, clearly in need of further explanation. It seems somewhat elusive – at least within a framework of Cartesian subjectivity. We return to this at the end of our article, but for now we want to explore the concept of 'active participation'. Samantha Punch explains that 'active' participatory methods

are those through which children '[b]ecome actively involved rather than passively responding' (Punch, 2002: 337). In this sense, 'active participation' implies both an intentionality (a conscious will) and a performativity (doing something). We explore the performative implications of 'active' participation in the next section, but first we want to question the intentionality embedded within Punch's statement.

'Active participation', intentionality and pedagogy

Active participation is intentional: to do more than 'passively respond', a participant has to make a conscious, informed decision to take part in a project or activity. However, it is difficult to imagine how this could be inferred from a child's behaviour. A child might actively decide to participate in what appears to be a passive way. For example, a child may sit in the corner, appear bored and contribute little or nothing to a group discussion; yet, they may have made the conscious decision to do so, and may even believe this to be 'participating'. Similarly, children may participate in what appears to be an active way out of habit rather than on the basis of a deliberate decision. This is a particularly important consideration given that generally children's experiences at school '[are] of compulsion, requirement, or the teacher's "request" that children participate' (David et al., 2001: 351). The same might be said of much of children's experience outside school where they are often persuaded and required to participate in various activities by their peers, parent(s) or other adults.

It is worth noting that this is not a criticism of 'participatory methods' per se, but of the claims that are made about them. Participatory methods do not straightforwardly equate with 'freedom'. Indeed, Owain Jones (2001) has argued that childhood research may present an irresolvable 'colonization' of childhood by adults. In some ways, research might be understood as a process of socialization through which children are taught to conform to adult norms and to value 'adult cultures' over their own. This is the exact thing that proponents of participatory methods wish to avoid. Indeed, to a large degree, the development of participatory methods has been caught up with the governance of childhood through the processes of education. Many of the recent texts about research involving young children (such as Clark and Moss, 2001; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003) have been specifically written for an audience of early childhood educators. For example, while Clark and Moss (2001) have stressed the need to study the 'lived lives' of young children in nurseries, rather than focus on them only as learners, they explicitly set out their 'mosaic approach' in curricular terms.

There is considerable slippage between pedagogy and research in this approach. Indeed, following the approach taken by preschool educators in Reggio Emilia, Italy (see Edwards et al., 1998), Clark and Moss envisage that 'listening to young children' will become embedded in the curriculum, so that early educational practices will become a process of 'pedagogical documentation' within a wider 'pedagogy of listening'. This is emblematic of the current trend towards 'reflective practice' in education more generally. For example, Glenda MacNaughton (2003) contends that good practice should be based in continuous cycles of 'action research' through which educators reflect upon and improve their everyday teaching practices. Likewise, many of the research techniques advocated as 'empowering' and 'participatory' mirror the pedagogic approaches used in schools and preschool in various ways. Activities such as role play, brainstorming and group discussion are used extensively in schools to address the personal and social development aspects of the curriculum (e.g. Mosley, 1996). Other methods, such as drawing, writing stories and completing worksheets, are sometimes explicitly chosen because they are familiar to children in that they form a large part of their daily school work (e.g. Punch, 2002). In doing so, researchers are expressly taking advantage of children's schooled docility

towards such activities. This is somewhat at odds with claims that such activities promote children's participation on the basis of active, informed decisions.

'Active participation', embodiment and performativity

As well as being intentional, 'active participation' involves action. That is, participatory methods require children to actively *do* something; they should be "handling things" rather than "just talking" (O'Kane, 2000: 140). In this sense, all research could be said to be 'participatory': task-based and action-oriented research practices simply require different styles of engagement than others. As such, we are unconvinced by claims that 'participatory methods' present 'an alternative to ethnographic methods' (O'Kane, 2000: 138). Indeed, despite her claim to have selected participatory techniques on this basis, Claire O'Kane's research was broadly ethnographic, proceeding largely through a series of individual interviews and focus groups, albeit augmented by various activities that served to stimulate discussion. In this sense, 'participatory' approaches can be said to extend and enhance, rather than replace, ethnographic approaches: they attempt to engage with children's embodied, and performative lives. In this vein, Paul Willis and Mats Trondman (2000) have argued that ethnographies should be concerned with heterogeneous entanglements of practice and discourse in the more-than-textual, multi-sensual worlds that they study.

For example, Cheryl Greenfield (2004) used child-directed photography to discover what the preschool children in her class valued in their outdoor play area. However, the data she used in her paper came not from the photographs alone, but from the discussions she had with the children while collaboratively scrapbooking them. Reflecting upon this, Greenfield noted: 'The success of research with young children lies in the watching, listening, reflecting and engaging in conversation; seeking to enter the child's world in just a small way' (2004: 4). In other words, the success lies in the ethnography, but only in so far as ethnography is understood as more than a straightforward 'interview, focus group, participant observation' package. Greenfield's research can thus be seen as part of a wider movement to unfold children's everyday experiences by 'listening' to their many 'voices'.

Also working with preschool children, Clark and Moss (2001) have argued that researchers should attempt to engage the myriad symbolic languages through which children represent and communicate their experiences. They advocate a 'mosaic' of techniques combining the visual with the verbal. Others have sought to engage more senses, engaging with children in various embodied and performative ways (see also Lancaster and Broadbent's [2003] pack on activities for 'listening' to young children). Such activities have the potential to engage the 'more-than-representational' (Lorimer, 2005) or 'non-representational' (Thrift, 1996) aspects of everyday life that have been the subject of much recent methodological discussion within cultural geography and the wider cultural studies (see also Dewsbury et al., 2002; Massumi, 2002).

Beyond participation

It seems to us, then, that emphasizing 'participation' may actually serve to reduce the possibilities within a research encounter. Participation means taking part, which necessitates some predefined activity in which the participants can take part. However, children may – and, at least in our experience, often do – act in ways beyond the limits prescribed by 'participatory' techniques. By way of illustration, take child-directed photography, which has become a popular method of involving children in research (e.g. Barker and Weller, 2003; Burke, 2005; Greenfield, 2004; Leavitt et al., 1998; Young and Barratt, 2001). Children may do a range of things with cameras: take pictures of things they find interesting; take pictures of what they think the

researcher wants to see; take pictures of their friends; explain to the researcher why they are taking each picture; take lots of pictures but say nothing about them, even when asked; ask the researcher to take pictures for them; give the camera to someone else; take no pictures; they may even break the camera deliberately. All of these would be *doing* something, but not all of them could be described as 'participation'.

Indeed, requiring that children participate might actually constrain the possibilities for them to act. For example, Catherine Burke (2005) claims to have engaged children as researchers through the use of self-directed photography in her study of the play spaces of primary school children. Yet clear boundaries were set upon what counted as participation:

The children were *instructed* to keep ownership of the camera and to record the site of their play each day. . . . The young researchers *had to adhere to a distinct agenda*. . . . The *requirement* to focus on spaces and places was explained. (Burke, 2005: 31; emphasis added)

Burke reports that this agenda was devised through discussions between the adult researchers and the children, presumably resulting in a consensus. However, the very notion of having an agenda to which everyone would adhere, arrived at through discussion between all parties, is itself a participatory norm based on (adult) democratic ideals. In the face of such ideals, there is a danger that certain kinds of action – taking photographs of people or animals, giving the camera to someone else, or breaking it – are understood as 'non-participation', and thus as forms of deviance rather than as legitimate ways of engaging in research. Indeed, Burke records how she strove to keep children 'on-task' during subsequent discussion of the photographs, in one case telling a child: 'Well, you're going to have to. . . . Come on, choose a photograph', as she digressed from the exercise (Burke, 2005: 34). The rhetoric of participation therefore risks setting up norms of appropriate engagement by implying that children should 'participate' in certain ways and not in others. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this as a didactic way of deriving specific data from children, but it seems incompatible with Burke's claims to have 'empowered' children as 'researchers'.

In our own research projects, by contrast, some of the most fascinating insights have emerged from children acting in unexpected ways: appropriating, resisting or manipulating our research techniques for their own purposes. Taking a broadly ethnographic approach, our respective projects were able to view such forms of action as potential data, rather than viewing them negatively as instances of non-compliance. In the following section, we explore this in more detail, drawing on some examples from our own experiences. We show how our projects were shaped by the actions of the children involved in various ways, many of which fell outside the narrow scope of participation we had anticipated as novices entering the field.

Participation, appropriation and manipulation?

Our individual research projects have much in common: they were both ethnographic studies of institutional environments for children, undertaken as students. Lesley's research became her undergraduate dissertation (Gallacher, 2002), while Mike's more substantial project informed both his master's dissertation (Gallagher, 2001) and his doctoral thesis (Gallagher, 2005). Lesley's research explored the sociospatial relations of the 'late-toddler' room of a private day nursery, in which children broadly in the age range of 2 to 3 years old were cared for. Mike's research looked at space and power in a Scottish state primary school, following a class from late primary two (6 to 7 years old) to the middle of primary four (8 to 9 years old).

During Mike's fieldwork, some of the children with whom he was working began to express an interest in the notepad that he was using to make jottings. Mike hadn't anticipated this but, like Corsaro and Molinari (2000), he allowed them to read what he had written, and to write in the pad if they asked to do so. Mostly they wrote messages to Mike or insults about other children. However, as his fieldwork progressed, the children became increasingly assertive about the pad, sometimes taking it from him and refusing to return it, leaving him unable to record his observations. In response, Mike tried to reassert control over the pad, leading to small power struggles. These became connected to wider games of power within the classroom.

Lesley also encountered similar appropriations of her notepad. The toddlers involved in Lesley's project could not yet read or write – indeed, many of them had little spoken language – but they were fascinated by her notebook nevertheless. Many of the children were keen to look at the notebook, and to use Lesley's pen to draw in it, often right on top of Lesley's attempts at notetaking. Sometimes this artwork obscured the notes so much as to render them unreadable. The children would also touch the notebook with paint-covered hands, leaving painty fingerprints all over the notebook that stuck the pages together once the paint had dried, and they would accidentally – possibly purposefully – rip the pages as they looked through the notebook.

The children in our projects not only appropriated our research tools; they often appropriated us too. Children would find all kinds of inventive ways to turn our presence in their classrooms and play areas to their advantage. We found ourselves used as play-things, props, or even stooges to children's activities. Early in his master's research, Mike found himself cajoled into spending playtimes and lunchtimes playing games with the children in the school playground. He would have much preferred to stay in the quiet safety of the classroom particularly as the children took advantage of his lack of physical fitness – Mike is asthmatic – to have him running after them most of the time.

The children would also use us as a means to gain advantage over other children, or to get around the school/nursery rules in various ways. In the nursery Lesley studied, the staff often sat down on the floor with the children during story and song times. The nursery staff would sometimes sit children on their laps during these times, both to offer reassurance and to keep 'misbehaviour' in check. Lesley would sit down on the carpet with the group during these times, and her lap became subject to 'ownership' struggles. Lesley would find herself sitting with her legs crossed in front of her – 'in a basket' – with three children sitting on her lap, sometimes more. The children spontaneously organized the use of Lesley among themselves, giving her very little say in the matter.

In these examples, it is not clear to us that the children were consciously and intentionally taking part in our respective projects, participating according to the model of agency outlined earlier. However, they were clearly making use of us in various ways. In turn, we were able to appropriate their activities as data for our own research. We could not have anticipated being appropriated in these ways, and yet these incidents gave us rich insights into children's behaviour, their ways of exercising power and negotiating social relationships within institutional spaces. Following de Certeau (1988), this process of mutual appropriation can be seen not as the outcome of predetermined, prescriptive techniques, but as a spontaneous and unpredictable process of tactics, counter-tactics and 'making do'.

Rethinking subjectivity: becoming and emergence

Understanding the engagement between children and researchers as an openended, unpredictable process enables us to rethink the broadly Cartesian model of subjectivity, introduced earlier in this article, in terms of becoming and emergence. Within the Cartesian model, 'agency' and 'intentionality' are attributed to coherent, autonomous and identifiable subjects – beings in their own right. This understanding of subjectivity underpins 'new paradigm' childhood research (Prout and James, 1990). As a concept, 'becoming' has been something of a casualty of the rejection of linear, predetermined and future-oriented 'developmental' frameworks within this movement. Indeed, the very notion of becoming has been almost vilified. However, this conceptual move is increasingly problematic, particularly as it seems to give childhood research a considerable 'lag' behind conceptual movements in the wider humanities and social sciences (Prout, 2005). The static and coherent model of subjectivity-as-being makes it difficult to think through children's insistent and strikingly apparent changeability. Yet becoming need not be tied, as in traditional developmental psychology, to a normative sequence of stages. We think that it is possible to reject predetermination without simultaneously ruling out change. To conceive of *process without predetermination* is to engage children in the *present continuous* tense. This, however, requires something of an ontological shift.

We, therefore, propose an emergent, constitutionally unfinished, 'almost-not-quite' ontology (following Thrift, 1996). Rather than seeing actions as produced by the conscious intentions of pre-existing subjects, we would suggest the reverse: that subjectivity is performatively produced through the continuous unfolding of action. As Nietzsche argued, 'there is no "being" behind the deed . . . "the doer" is invented as an afterthought' (1994: 28). This allows us to think in terms of a minimal and emergent subjectivity in becoming. To think in terms of 'becomings' is to reject understandings of humans – adults and children – as singular, autonomous agents: identifiable subjects imbued with agency. In this vein, John Wylie (2006) has argued for a heteronymic and emergent subject, such that the self is not simply multiple, but also depersonalized. This might initially seem to be a strange claim. However, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1994) conceive of an immanent field of relations between impersonal forces from which subjects continually emerge in the course of events. The subject emerges in a continuous process of personalizing these forces, which are enacted and assembled in the course of events (Dewsbury et al., 2002). It is on this basis that Deleuze can claim that '[s]ubjectification isn't anything to do with a "person": it's a specific collective individuation relating to an event' (1995: 99).

However, while events are impersonal, they are not asocial. On the contrary, the immanent field of emergence is open-endedly social, but this sociality is *ontogenetic*. That is, it is social in a manner that is prior to the separating out of individuals and identifiable subjects. As Brian Massumi argues, this is "'pure" sociality . . . interaction-in-the-making . . . relation' (2002: 9). These ideas are useful because they enable the world to be conceived in terms of difference, rather than identity. Deleuze (1994) has argued that, in proceeding through judgement and analogy, 'representational thought' can think nothing other than stasis and identity. Instead, he endeavours to think of the world as in process, always-already underway. For Deleuze 'difference' is nothing more than the becoming-otherwise of the world. Thinking of difference in this way is to view the world not as a collection of autonomous, self-contained subjects possessed of both agency and knowledge, but as a plethora of *events* – actions and interactions from which both subjects and knowledges emerge.

In this way, knowledge is thoroughly *relational*. Relational epistemologies are now well established in the feminist literature (in particular, see Haraway, 1991), where relationality is more often mobilized in terms of narrative co-construction within ethnographic studies (e.g. Ellis and Berger, 2003). Some aspects of this type of epistemology are also beginning to filter into the childhood studies literature, with Jacqui Cousins (1999) and Berry Mayall (2000) both advocating a conversational approach to research involving children. In this respect, Penny Lancaster and Vanessa Broadbent (2003) argue that children should be approached as experts in their own lives, but not the only experts. We would go further and abandon the very notion of 'expertise'. As emergent becomings – always-unfinished subjects-in-the-making – humans cannot claim to be experts: to be fully knowing, competent and rational. In the final section of our article, we examine what this might mean for researchers and their methodologies.

Immaturity and vulnerability

We have now moved from notions of 'participation', 'agency' and 'intention' to an ontology of 'emergence', 'becoming' and 'inexpertise'. It strikes us that this is less a question of methods or techniques than of attitude. Thus, we want to offer suggestions for a particular attitude in research: an attitude of *methodological immaturity*. In this, we are following both Nick Lee (2001) and John Horton (2001) in seeking a critical rehabilitation of the concept of 'immaturity' in childhood research. Like 'becoming', 'immaturity' has been largely sidelined in 'new paradigm' childhood research, viewed as an unhelpful product of the hierarchization of the adult–child binary. Yet, within the ontological framework suggested earlier, the distinction between maturity and immaturity becomes as irrelevant as that between being and becoming. If all being is becoming, then 'we' are all constitutionally immature – and this is not to be seen negatively, as something lacking, but rather in terms of *potential*. In emphasizing (inter)dependence, incompetence, incompleteness and vulnerability, the concept of immaturity begins to (re)position social research – and life more generally – as a necessarily complex, incomplete and messy process. It asks for a little humility: 'we' are all fallible: imperfect and naive, learning and changing; 'immature' rather than fully formed, rational, competent and autonomous agents.

Such an attitude has some potential to undermine dualistic notions of powerful researchers and vulnerable participants, competent adults and incompetent children. As Corsaro and Molinari (2000) point out, adults are often ignorant novices in children's environments. In contrast to the dominant image of the academic as expert, the very status of the researcher as seeking knowledge suggests a position of incompleteness and immaturity. If researchers were fully mature, they would know all the answers; and if they knew all the answers, there would be no need for research. It seems to us that, if research is to achieve anything, it should proceed from a position of ignorance. For us, research is fundamentally a process of *muddling through*, sometimes feeling lost and out of place, asking stupid questions, being corrected and having our preconceptions destroyed. In this way, we cannot deny our incompetence and vulnerabilities: our immaturity. And we do not want to.

It is not quite so simple as *choosing* or *cultivating* immaturity or vulnerability, however. Paul Harrison (2008) argues that it is difficult to apprehend vulnerability other than as a failing, a weakness, or a misfortune – a contingency that should be solved, overcome and eliminated. Inside a Cartesian framework of intentional, auto-affective subjectivity, it is difficult to view the passivity and exposure of vulnerability in any other way. This enables us to return to thinking about what 'passive participation' might mean. The emphasis in the childhood literature is upon promoting 'active participation', but we think that abandoning all 'passive participation' in favour of only that which is insistently and obviously active could be counterproductive.

Harrison argues that dominant 'western' traditions of thought urge us towards action. However, to be vulnerable is to be passive, susceptible and exposed – *it is to be without guarantee*:

Vulnerability cannot be willed, chosen, cultivated or honed and neither, therefore, does it necessarily or even primarily denote a weakness or a misfortune, rather it describes the inherent and contingent susceptibility of corporeal life to the unchosen and the unforeseen, its inherent openness to what exceeds its abilities to contain and absorb. (Harrison, 2008: 427)

In this sense, the strange phrase 'passive participation' may help to remind us of our immaturity, vulnerability and fallibility.

To think of an emergent subjectivity is to emphasize process over product; it is to think in terms of continual means without end (see Agamben, 2000). These means cannot be reduced to codified rules and techniques. We therefore join Derek McCormack (2003) in arguing for an apprehension of the world not as a series of sites from which we can extract meaning, but as a field of practices and processes through which we might engage with potential and think differently. In attending to the transformative potential of events, 'we' might shift our ethical burden from individual subjects towards events. In Deleuze's terms, such an ethics demands that we become worthy of events in all their singularity, rather than seeking to close them off (Deleuze, 1995). We might then begin to think of research as *experimentation*. Researchers are not simply reporting a world that exists 'out-there', but are creating and experimenting with an emergent one. Brian Massumi (2002: 19) refers to the unpredictability of such experimentation as 'creative contagion': we cannot rely on the application of a technique; instead we must innovate, adapt, improvise and invent. It seems to us that this immature attitude of creative experimentation might be in keeping with the general tone, if not the letter, of the current interest in 'participatory methods' within childhood studies.

Conclusion: an immature methodology

Perhaps, despite its title, this has not been an article about methods. We are not interested in advising on or refining specific techniques. Our aim here has been to open up some methodological discussion. We are concerned that participatory methods are in danger of being seen as a 'fool-proof' technology that – when applied carefully and conscientiously – will enable research involving children to achieve ethical and epistemological validity. Yet, participatory methods are no less problematic, or ethically ambiguous, than any other research method. In this article, we have not been arguing against participatory methods as such – we have no particular issue with researchers asking children to draw, dance or build – we are simply concerned that such methods are not used naively.

We do not believe that participatory techniques are inherently any better, or worse, than any other research method. They are not objectively 'right': an epistemological and ethical panacea. For us, what matters is not so much the methods used, but the ways and the spirit in which they are used: the methodological *attitude* taken. Good research practice cannot be reduced to ingenious techniques, planned in advance and carefully applied. Research is inherently unpredictable: the best laid plans are liable to go awry. Methodological immaturity privileges open-ended process over predefined technique. It does not aim to discover or uncover a pre-existing world, offering instead experimentation, innovation and 'making do'. While 'participation' may seem laudable, it cannot, and does not, deliver all that it promises – perhaps simply because, in the face of the persistent unpredictability of the social world, it tries to offer some kind of guarantee.

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